

YOU SHALL RECEIVE POWER

Ignoring someone's final instructions would not be smart, especially if that person holds all authority in heaven and earth. Before ascending into heaven Jesus told His disciples, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

For Jesus' followers, with their Jewish background, the concept of "receiving power" and "the Spirit coming upon" people was no mystery. They would have known their sacred Scriptures and been familiar with the stories of Israel's famous heroes such as Gideon, Samson, Saul and David, whose lives were dramatically transformed when the Holy Spirit came upon them. They knew how the seventy received some of the Spirit that had rested upon Moses, and Joshua was empowered by the Spirit when Moses laid his hands on him.

Fearful Gideon, called by God to a mammoth and frightening task, regarded himself as an irrelevant son of an irrelevant father and by no means a courageous military leader. When he was hidden away in a cave, safe from marauding enemies, God called and commissioned him. He also clothed him with the Holy Spirit's power, as a result of which he became a genuinely charismatic leader, gathering Israel and inspiring a tiny, outnumbered army into a famous victory, his secret being the transformation that took place when the Spirit came upon him (Judges 6:34).

David's phenomenal success was rooted in a secret encounter with

Samuel the prophet, who anointed him with oil, “and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward” (1 Samuel 16:13).

Elisha knew that if he were to continue what Elijah had started, he must have the same Spirit that rested on his master; without that powerful anointing it would be impossible. Likewise, Peter and the apostles must have recognized that if they were to carry on where Jesus had stopped, they would need similar power.

WHAT ABOUT US?

As a young Christian this was precisely the question that I asked. All too aware of my serious personal limitations, I was deeply conscious of my own need of power to serve God. The Scriptures made plain how timid Peter, who denied his Lord, was amazingly transformed by the coming of the Holy Spirit on him. His fears were banished; he became bold and fearless in proclaiming the gospel. I longed for the same. Could I receive the Spirit like Peter did? Could I be clothed with power and transformed like Gideon had been?

I developed a growing and increasingly insistent thirst that if there was an experience of the Holy Spirit that would make Jesus more real and more obviously present, and that would set me free from my inhibitions and reluctance, I wanted it! Too often I had missed opportunities to bear witness to Christ and be public about my personal commitment to Him.

Some work colleagues and friends knew that I was a church-goer but none knew that I believed from the depths of my heart that Jesus Christ was God’s Son, that I was personally certain my sins were forgiven, and that I knew I had eternal life. I found no liberty at all to speak to people about things that really mattered. If I could know the kind of release that Peter and the apostles enjoyed, I was eager to find it for myself. Perhaps you find yourself in the same position.

The question that still arises for many Christians is, “Where do I fit into all this?” Am I automatically Spirit-filled at my conversion or do I have to wait for an endowment of the Spirit, as the disciples did in early Acts? As a young Christian I was thoroughly perplexed.

I read all the books on the subject that I could lay my hands on, and concluded that if respected men like John Stott and Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones (both great heroes of mine) could not agree about it, there was very little hope that I would work it out. I was, however, personally persuaded that I needed power from God. I tried to pray about it by myself and tried to receive the experience of the Spirit's empowering by faith. I sometimes was able to convince myself that something had happened, but gradually it all drained away and I had to admit the depressing truth that I was no different from before.

For me, the whole thing came to a head one Sunday afternoon. I had been leading a Bible Study for the young people at our church, and I decided to get some fresh air before the evening service. I headed for Brighton on the English coast, not far from where I lived. In the area known as the Fish Market I encountered an embarrassing spectacle. Surrounded by a crowd of laughing people and assailed by assorted coins and cigarette packets, two elderly ladies were preaching the gospel. The whole scene, with its Bible text banners, the reedy voices of the old ladies, the mocking crowd, filled me with shame.

"Why does it have to be like this?" I thought.

"You are ashamed because these are old ladies," came the answer. "In the Bible I called vigorous young men to do this sort of thing. But these old ladies are willing to do it. Are you?"

"Lord, I would rather die than stand in the open air like that," I honestly replied.

Just then I was aware of two men in front of me and overheard one say, "Look at those old fools! Why can't they keep their religion to themselves? Why don't they keep it in their churches?"

Again I heard a voice inside me: "If you can't stand up and preach, at least you can own me to these two men. Tell them that you are a Christian."

I recoiled even from this prospect. I had just spoken to Christians at a Bible Study with great confidence but I had never been free to talk to the unconverted about Jesus. I felt ashamed of my cowardice. Miserable, I rushed home, got on my knees and cried out to God

that I must be filled with the Spirit. Jesus said, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37–38). God has ways of making us thirsty! I was desperate!

The next day, when I arrived at my office in London, I phoned a friend with whom I often had lunch. “Derek,” I said, “I must see you. Can we meet at lunchtime?” He readily agreed. I knew there was something different about Derek. Often we shared a table with others in a café; he would talk with them about Christ and give them a tract. While I squirmed, he would talk freely about the Lord. I found it all so embarrassing. I hated his freedom while at the same time longing for it with all my heart. I told him how I felt, adding, “I must have what you’ve got.” He invited me to his church on the following Sunday saying that someone there would pray for me to be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

A LIFE-CHANGING DAY

The following weekend found me travelling to London to stay with Derek. On the Saturday evening I met some of the young people from his church. They were going on a bus trip to take part in a meeting at another church. Never had I seen such a zealous, vital group. Several were invited by their leader to stand up and give their testimonies without any prior warning or preparation. It was magnificent. The young people I was used to would need a few weeks’ notice for this sort of thing and even then would have read from notes.

For the first time in my life I heard someone speak in tongues during the course of a meeting and then, to my astonishment, one of the young Londoners who had been laughing and joking on the coach earlier gave an interpretation. It was amazing. Everything seemed to be in a different league from anything I had ever encountered, but I knew that this was what I wanted.

The next afternoon I was taken to a special meeting for those who wanted to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. The previous day we

had been fasting and praying together about my need to be filled with the Spirit, and Derek had prophesied. I had never heard this gift before but I received it as if God Himself was speaking. “My little sheep,” he said, “keep very close to me and I will lead you to living waters and give you your heart’s desire.” Having heard the promise, I had no doubt that God was going to fill me with His Holy Spirit.

The pastor moved along the line, praying for each one in turn to be filled with the Spirit. Eventually he came to me and laid his hands on my head. I felt nothing at all! All my expectations and hopes were shattered.

When the pastor finished praying for me and left the room, the people around me said, “Well, praise the Lord, then.” Everyone in the room was praising God except me, but I refused to join in. How could I praise the Lord when nothing had happened? I wanted something real! I was then shown from the Bible the place of faith in all our dealings with God. I saw that I had done all that I could. I had come to God; hands had been laid upon me; I must now believe Him. Certainly I had come expecting to receive. I had arrived at this moment full of faith. So I turned back to God and quietly thanked Him.

That did not satisfy my friends, however. “Come on, Terry,” they encouraged me. “Praise God in tongues.” I longed to be able to do just that, but how? “Just begin to speak!” they told me. They reminded me that it was not God who spoke in tongues on the Day of Pentecost, but that the disciples themselves spoke in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:4). It all sounded most unsatisfactory to me, but, in spite of all my arguments, my friends prevailed. I spoke some sounds, some syllables. Even as I did so a thousand voices in my mind were mocking me, telling me that I was making it all up. I stopped, but my friends encouraged me to carry on. I did so, pressing on and battling against the doubts that were flooding my mind.

Through all these doubts, I heard my friend’s fiancée speak. “You know, you’re very clever, Terry, if you are making all this up. You have been doing it for ages.”

We all laughed together and the tension was broken. I realized how worried I had become about it all; how self-defeating it was to get so intense. As I relaxed and continued to speak in tongues it was as if a flood of the Holy Spirit went right through me. I found myself not only speaking freely in tongues but also calling out to God in the most loving and intimate terms that I could imagine. God was right here in my heart! His love was absolutely overflowing in me! I truly loved Him like never before.

The meeting was now over and the main church service was about to start, but I didn't want to stop this wonderful new experience with its amazing sense of the intimacy of God's presence right inside me! I sat in the back row of the very large church building, while others were all in the front half, put my hand over my mouth so that I would not disturb anybody and spoke in tongues throughout the whole service. I had been a Christian for six years and had never doubted my salvation but had never known anything like it! God was so present! This was joy unspeakable and full of glory!

“ABBA! FATHER!”

In Paul's words, “Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Galatians 4:6). As Douglas Moo says, commenting on Romans 8:15: “In using the verb ‘crying out’, Paul stresses that our awareness of God as Father comes not from rational consideration or from external testimony alone, but from a truth deeply felt and intensely experienced” (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans, 1996). For me this was certainly a truth being “deeply felt and intensely experienced”. I had never felt or experienced such a thing before!

Within a short space of time I had the great privilege of sharing my testimony with the young people from the Baptist church to which I belonged in Hove and, with the pastor's encouragement, laid hands on many of them, whereupon they entered enthusiastically into a similar experience. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote: “The baptism with the Spirit is always associated primarily and specifically with

witness and testimony and service” (Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Joy Unspeakable*, Kingsway, 1984).

In the weeks that followed, I and several of those young people regularly spent our Sunday afternoons at Brighton’s Fish Market where we stood together and sang, after which I stood on a box and began to preach on that same seafront to the passing crowds. Things had become dramatically different. I was actually doing what I had always regarded as impossible. The Holy Spirit had set me free.